

**THIS MAN WENT DOWN TO HIS HOUSE JUSTIFIED, RATHER THAN THE OTHER**  
**- Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Luke 18, 9-14**

*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’*

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

In his teaching, Jesus presented God as a Father whose love is not attracted by the merits of the people, but by their needs. This is what the evangelist Luke expresses in chapter 18, verses 9-14. Let's read.

*“He also told this parable ...”* A parable with a very specific message “*..to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:*” So Jesus addresses this message to those who feel righteous. Righteous means - from a religious point of view - those who consider themselves completely at ease with God based on their religious practice, based on their situation, and for this reason they despise others. It is typical of religious people.

When one feels right with God, he then allows himself to judge, condemn and then despise others. And it is to this kind of people, those very pious and very religious, that Jesus addresses this parable.

*“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”* Jesus presents the opposites of the religious and civil society of the time. The term Pharisee means separate. Who were the Pharisees? They were lay people who undertook to observe in everyday life all the precepts, laws and observances prescribed by law. They were thought to be as many as 613. They were careful not to eat anything unclean, they were scrupulous observant of the rest on the Sabbath. They were the saints par excellence. Therefore the Pharisee is the person who is considered - and is considered himself the closest to God.

The opposite was the tax collector. Publican comes from *publicum*, the public thing. They were the tax collectors; they were considered professional thieves, often at the service of the pagan rulers, they were considered the offenders of all the commandments and had as a mark of impurity for which for them there was no hope of salvation. Even if one day the publican had converted, he could no longer change jobs and then for him there was no hope of salvation.

So Jesus presents the two opposites. The one closest to God, and the one not only the farthest, but even excluded by God.

*“The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed ...”* Literally the evangelist writes "he prayed to himself". The Pharisee's prayer is not addressed to God, but he made himself his own God, his own

idol. His is a useless slandering of the useless virtues that Jesus does not require, which God does not require. And here is his prayer “ *God, I thank you that I am not like other men...* ” Here is the prayer of this person who considers himself to be just, who considers himself a model of holiness, immediately leads to judgment and contempt for other men. “... *extortioners, unjust, adulterers,..* ” (here there is a hint of contempt) “ *..or even like this tax collector.* ”

What is it that makes him feel so good about God, what makes him feel so holy, so right? That which God does not require. Useless things. In fact, now we will see that this Pharisee lists all superfluous, useless and therefore harmful actions.

. “ *I fast twice a week;..* ” Fasting was asked for once a year, the day of forgiveness, but pious people, like the Pharisees, fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, in memory of Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai and then of his descent . They were the days of fasting.

“ *I give tithes of all that I get.* ” The tenth was a tax that was paid on certain foodstuffs but not on everything. He, by scruple, offers everything and pays everything. We note that he does not list any benevolent and favourable attitude to the needs of others, all addressed to himself and to God. There is a Pharisee who says that like him nobody observed the law and that when he later repented - it is Saint Paul of Tarsus - he will say that “ *All these prescriptions have the appearance of wisdom with their false religiosity, and humility and mortification of the body, but reality has no value other than to satisfy selfishness, the flesh* ”. Saint Paul, who had also experienced this, says that they are of no use. All these devotions, all these religious practices, are not only useless, but harmful because they do nothing but satisfy the self.

In the letter to the Philippians Saint Paul will come to say that when he knew the message of Jesus all these devotions and practices that seemed so important to him considered them an excrement.

“ *But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven,..* ” He feels guilty, he knows he is excluded from God. “ *..but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’* ” literally “be benevolent, show me your mercy”. The publican shows he has faith. He knows that he is in a desperate situation, for him there is no forgiveness, for him there is no salvation, but despite this - and here it seems to hear the echo of Psalm 23 where the psalmist says “ *even if I go to a valley of darkness you are with me* ” - he says “You see Lord what a life I have, I can't change, this is my situation, you know it. Well, despite this, show me your love and your mercy ”.

Jesus' conclusion is disconcerting “ *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, ...* ” At the beginning the evangelist presented those people who considered themselves “just” and now he speaks of “justified”, that is to say, alright and in harmony with God. But what did he do? He did not repent. He did not say that he changes his behaviour, he did not say any of this, but asked the Lord to show him his mercy.

It is Jesus' God , his love is not directed to those who deserve it, but to those who need it.

“ *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.* ” Therefore Jesus overturns the paradigms of society, those who were considered closest to God for their religious practices, for Jesus are the most distant, because they do nothing for others. What counts for Jesus is not what is addressed to the divinity, but the attitudes of good, of well-being that are made towards others. And above all, in conclusion, Jesus remembers that God's love is not granted as a reward for ones merits, but as a gift for ones needs.

